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ABSTRACT

A literature review on the family environments of gifted students found that gifted children are more likely to be living in intact families than in divorced families. Children of single parents were more likely to be low-achieving, tardy, absent, truant, discipline problems, suspended, expelled, and dropouts than students in two-parent families. Although the numbers of gifted children living in divorced families or going through a divorce are low, their need for support is very real. The teacher has a responsibility to recognize behavior changes in gifted students who are experiencing the divorce of their parents. Teachers should also be aware that gifted children's understanding of divorce and their response to it are different from that of other children. (JDD)

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WHOLE FAMILY: WHOLE CHILD BROKEN FAMILY: .....

A PAPER PRESENTED TO THE
WEST VIRGINIA ASSOCIATION FOR GIFTED AND TALENTED
Parkersburg.WV
30 September 1988

BY
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and
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This presentation is in part a formal paper using the research ideas found in the professional literature. It is in part a workshop sharing materials and ideas which we feel will be useable in classes for gifted children. Mostly it is the story of our personal odyssey as we recognized and came to grips with the simple fact that gifted children are more likely to be living in intact homes with original parents.

Ms. DeVaul noticed that few of the children she works with had been involved in a divorce. Informally she found that 83% of her children were living with two original parents. She reported that observation to the members of the education department of Bethany College. They were fascinated. The first question was, is this true, generally, or something reflecting the conservative nature of the rural communities she serves? If true, generally, what are the implications?

Two approaches were taken. First, the other gifted classes in Brooke County were surveyed. The teachers of the gifted, having worked closely with both the student and parents were already aware of the home situation in most cases. Only in a few instances was it necessary to consult records, the student or other classroom teachers.

In each of the school settings it was shown that significantly more gifted students live in an intact home than not. Percentages of those living with both original parents ranged from a low of 57% to a high of 95%, with a median of 86%. Interestingly, the school with the lowest percent living with both parents also had the fewest identified gifted students of any school in the county.

At the same time a review of the literature was undertaken. The first search revealed a few leads and some other titles to look for but nothing concrete. We checked the standard source, Lewis Terman's seminal Genetic Studies of the Gifted (Vol. IV.1948.) Terman did indeed note that the young people he studied were more likely to be living in intact families. "Up to 1922, the percentage of parents who had been divorced was 5.2, and of those separated 1.9 making a total of 7.1 percent either divorced or separated. The incidence of broken families was definitely below that for the general population of comparable age in California in 1922, and has remained below since that date." In an explanatory footnote the idea is expanded. "By 1940 the incidence of divorce among parents had increased to 13.9 percent. This is still below that of the generality in California of comparable age range."

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At this point we knew two things. First, in our Brooke County Gifted classes there are few children from single parent or divorced homes. Second, Terman found the same thing in 1922 and 1940. Are the Brooke data and the Terman data overstated? Is the observation that gifted children are less likely to be from single parent homes generalizable?

B. Frank Brown (1980) reported in a Phi Delta Kappan article that, "The [census] bureau projects that 48% of all children born in 1980 will live a considerable time with only one parent before they reach the age of 18." "The figure is growing at the rate of more than one million a year. It is estimated that half of all marriages will end in divorce and that three of every four divorces occur in families with children." If the divorce rate is in the 40% range, and if 48% of all children will have only one parent for a time, then the 14% divorce rate in the Brooke County gifted universe appears to be significantly low. This suggests that intact families are much more likely to have gifted children.

The implication is that an intact family somehow contributes to the ability measurement. If this were the case, would we consider adding points to a child's score if we knew that the family was diminished?

Brown was reporting research by the Kettering Foundation and the National Association of Elementary Principals which showed that single family situations do in fact affect school sucess. This study acknowledged that divorce is not the only cause of a single parent situation in the home, that death of a parent or birth to an unwed mother will also produce single family situations. Brown also factored out income by eliminating free and reduced lunch students. "Again a substantially higher proportion of high achievers was found to come from the two parent home.... an inordinate proportion of children from one-parent families are also low achievers." Brown then looked at other factors long associated with school success. Single parent children were more likely to be tardy, absent, truant, discipline problems, suspended, expelled, and dropouts than those in two parent families.

In Social Work (1979) Wallerstein and Kelly reported that five years after divorce 63% of the children were thriving or at least coping reasonably well but 37% "...were depressed and wistfully looking backward to the predivorce family." It is clear, then, that divorce is a factor in school success, in behavior and in the instruments often used to decide which children will be called gifted.

Certainly some of the identified gifted students, those already in our gifted programs are living in a single parent or divorced family. Others may experience divorce while they are in the program. We know the effects of divorce on children. What about these children? Will they be ones who are resilient and thriving, or those who fall apart with academic and behavior problems? First of all, since there are fewer of them because divorce is less common in the gifted group, they will be more different from their significant gifted peer group. This is just one more blow to what can be an already diminished self concept.

In an article subtitled "The Special Case of the Gifted Child" Mary Yeazel (1987) from WVU suggested that "Gifted children have been characterized as emotionally intense, excruciatingly sensitive, and filled with idealism. They are prone to self-criticism and perfectionalism. They often express feelings of inadequacy and inner-conflict." She quotes Webb (1982) as saying that the gifted are often told that they are the world's best hope for the future, that they will learn and be in a position to fix things when they grow-up. Yet in the divorce situation they are powerless, their world is out of control. They have little peer support, no skills, and imperfect understanding.

We now raise the question: Does the teacher of the gifted have a responsibility here? Certainly, at the very least, a counselor should be informed of the family situation. The teacher should recognize behavior changes including, according to Michael and Sharon Onizo (1987), loss of appetite, aggression,

anxiety, anger, sadness, inability to sleep at night, daydreaming, guilt feelings, lower academic achievement and depression. What else should happen?

Carolyn Falk (1987) did a very interesting study of children's perceptions of divorce. Her sample of 41 children included 25 gifted, some of whom were not living with two biological parents. The gifted children understood divorce differently from their nongifted peers. They reflected their greater cognitive skills by seeing more reasons, identifying more options and predicting consequences. Their view point was broader.

Falk included gifted children who had gone through divorce and those who had not. She found that gifted, divorced or not, were more similar to other gifted in their responses than they were to nongifted.

> Gifted children saw issues at a greater length and with a broader scope than did non-gifted children. When gifted children were asked about the effects of divorce on school life, they answered with, 'It depends' and proceeded to create several scenarios based on the different possible premises. When asked to describe the pictures that comprise a family story they were able to see the adult as well as the child's point of view.

Falk makes the case that while support groups and special counseling may be necessary for children of divorced parents the needs and responses of the gifted children are different from those of other children. She further suggests that we should be sensitive to the child's preference. To some children home and school are different. School serves almost as a safe haven where the problems of the home can be left behind.

Where do we arrive on this personal odyssey? Our review of the research leads us to see that although the numbers of gifted children living in divorced families or going through a divorce may be low the need for support is still very real. It is not clear but one could make the case that support may be more important because fewer of the child's peers are experiencing the problem and because gifted children experience it differently from other children. We are sceptical of packaged plans for group counseling. The child's preference for the role of the school should be recognized and respected.

This would seem to be a good situation for bibliotherapy and certainly there are books available which deal with the various aspects of the problem. The value here is that the child can explore different scenarios and possibly even begin the dialog with the teacher which will lead to the proper school response for that child. But, above all, sensitivity is needed.

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ADDENDA

The following bibliographies of books for children were also distributed:

Craver, Kathleen. "Breaking Up Is Hard To Do." The School Counselor, March, 1983.

Martin, Maggie, Don Martin, Judy Porter. "Bibliotherapy: Children of Divorce." The School Counselor, March 1983.